



Testimony of

Meredith Ferraro, MS, Executive Director  
Southwestern Area Health Education Center (AHEC)

*Presented to the*  
**Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee**  
*of the*  
**Connecticut General Assembly**

February 15, 2017, Hartford, Connecticut

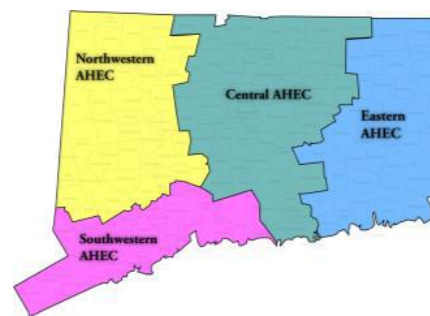
*The projected state budget shortage for FY 18-19 provides decreased funding for the CT Area Health Center (AHEC) Network from \$406,723 to \$378,349 in the AHEC Bridgeport line item, and possible cuts through the UCONN Health block grant under the Higher Education and Employment Advancement budget for the CT Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Network. This decrease in funding will directly affect the number of high school students participating in our Youth Health Service Corps programs in the Bridgeport, Stratford and New Haven public schools, as well as our Collegiate Health Service Corps programs at Quinnipiac University, University of Bridgeport, Fairfield University and Southern CT State University. These cuts to this funding is imperative for providing Connecticut residents with critical resources and programs that are both timely and essential in developing and maintaining a healthcare workforce which is cost effective, culturally competent, inter-professional, and responsive to the needs of our communities. The primary care workforce shortage crisis requires a systems approach, which includes development of the future primary care workforce, supporting the current workforce, and incorporating the changes health reform brings in meeting the Triple Aim, and Connecticut's State Innovation Model Testing (SIM) grant. The Connecticut AHEC Network plays an important part in solving the primary care health profession shortage crisis by designing and implementing collaborative programs for diverse youth who pursue a career in health care, by providing continuing education for the existing health care workforce, and through education and training for Community Health Workers (CHWs). The Connecticut AHEC Network seeks to prevent any reduction of our vital services in order to maintain the current education and recruitment efforts statewide, while continuing to build synergy and cohesiveness in the K-16 pipeline. With this continued funding, Southwestern AHEC will be able to provide Community Health Worker Training for the SIM grant, developing the CHW workforce infrastructure for Connecticut, and will continue to build the primary care and allied health workforce, by connecting students to careers, professionals to communities and communities to better health.*

My name is Meredith Ferraro and I am pleased to provide this testimony to address the imperative need to maintain the \$406,723 in the AHEC Bridgeport line in the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee Budget and prevent potential cuts to the UCHC block grant. I represent Southwestern AHEC, one of the four, 501(c)(3) not for profit AHEC centers of the CT AHEC Network. Southwestern AHEC covers southern Fairfield and New Haven counties, focusing on “Opening doors to better health in underserved communities through education, outreach and careers.” We provide programing on both a statewide and local basis, targeting Connecticut residents with critical resources and programs that are essential in developing and supporting a healthcare workforce that provides quality care, is cost effective, accessible and culturally competent, inter-professional and responsive to the health care needs of the state.



For the past 18 years the Connecticut AHEC Network has successfully linked local community groups with the resources of the University of Connecticut, its Health Center and other academic institutions, and health professions training programs across the state. The CT AHEC Network provides state-wide coverage and programming to thousands of residents through its collaboration with more than 200 community based partner organizations.

The CT AHEC Network is based at the University of Connecticut Health Center and is implemented through four regional centers located in Willimantic, Hartford, Waterbury, and greater Bridgeport. The four centers provide programs at a local level with great efficiency, and are of high quality, effective and flexible to meet local needs.



### ***The CT AHEC Network Connects Communities to Better Health***

*Interprofessional & community-based outreach programs & services reaching thousands of residents*

- Youth Mental Health First Aid Certificate
- Migrant Farm Worker, South Park Homeless Shelter & Covenant Soup Kitchen Clinics
- State Innovation Model Initiative – Community Health Workers Workforce Development

### ***CT AHEC Network Connects Professionals to Communities***

*Training programs that invest in Connecticut's health care workforce*

- Certified Nursing Assistant Training
- Medical Interpreter Training
- Community Health Worker Training
- Naloxone/HPV/CIRT/PCCAMP Continuing Education for Health Care and Public Health Professionals

### ***CT AHEC Network Connects Students to Careers in Health***

*Nationally recognized pipeline programs growing the next generation of health care providers*

- Urban Service Track (University of Connecticut & Quinnipiac University, 4 campuses, 6 health professions schools)
- Health Occupation & Technology Careers in Connecticut (HOT Guide) website  
[www.healthcareersinct.com](http://www.healthcareersinct.com)
- AmeriCorps (national service members working with high schools and colleges statewide)
- Collegiate Health Service Corps (underrepresented and disadvantaged college students statewide)
- Youth Health Service Corps (underrepresented and disadvantaged high school students statewide)
- Biomedical Engineering Discovery Saturday Program (middle and high school students statewide)

**Community Benefit:** CT AHEC students participate in volunteer and service learning activities that directly benefit the communities they serve. Since 2012, CT AHEC students have provided over **221,000 hours of service**. The total monetary value of this service is **\$4,407,206**.

**Table 1: Community Benefit of AHEC Volunteer and Service Learning Programs Since 2012**

<b>AHEC Service Program</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Hours Served</b>	<b>Community Benefit</b>
<b>Youth Health Service Corps</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> graders	54,577 hours	\$481,364
<b>Collegiate Health Service Corps</b>	College Students	14,800 hours	\$131,321
<b>AmeriCorps</b>	College Graduates	141,519 hours	\$3,510,459
<b>Urban Service Track</b>	Health Profession Students	10,475 hours	\$284,062
<b>Total</b>		<b>221,371 hours</b>	<b>\$4,407,206</b>

**Community member education** from July to December 2016 = 4,160 individuals

Southwestern AHEC's Youth Health Service Corps has **1500 YHSC members who have completed 24,103 hours from July 2011 through January 2015**. Success is documented by the following:

- **96% of current participants said they have increased knowledge of health careers as a result of the YHSC program**
- **94% have increased knowledge on how to improve their own health**
- **90% have an interest in pursuing a health careers as a result of the program**
- **96% plan to attend college as a result of the program**

- **HOT Guide** - Through our on-line health careers manual (HOT Guide – Health Occupations and Technology Careers ([www.healthcareersinct.com](http://www.healthcareersinct.com)), the Connecticut AHEC Network provides current and accurate information on Connecticut-based health professions programs, admissions prerequisites, training, credentialing and roles of over 85 health careers to students, parents, teachers, guidance counselors and librarians, more than 1 million times each year.
- **Providing continuing education that improves the care received by vulnerable populations.** The Connecticut AHEC Network sponsored 70 continuing education offerings for the state’s health care professionals with over **1,675 participants annually**. Topics included chronic disease management, immunization and public health, cultural competence, utilization of medical interpreters, Community Health Workers, etc.
- **Partnering with community organizations to address local health issues.** As an example, Northwestern Connecticut AHEC partnered with organizations across the state to provide **Youth and Adult Mental Health First Aid** Certification to over 500 residents to improve health outcomes for people who suffer from mental illness.
- **Developing and supporting community based inter-professional training opportunities for health professions students.** For example, the Connecticut AHEC Network’s **Urban Service Track** produces a cadre of well qualified health care professionals committed to serving Connecticut’s urban underserved populations. Participating schools include the University of Connecticut Schools of Pharmacy, Nursing, Medicine, Dental Medicine, Social Work, and Quinnipiac University’s Physician Assistant Program. Urban Health Scholars gain valuable exposure to the complex and challenging issues of health care in the inner city with a strong mentorship component supporting the scholars. The State Innovation Model Testing Grant recommended the expansion of the Urban Service Track at universities across the state.
- **The State Innovation Model Testing Grant awarded to CT by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) provides the CT AHEC Network with funding** to build the develop CHW workforce and to build the infrastructure for CHWs to have a role in health care and population health delivery, and have sustainable funding. Technical assistance and a training continuum will prepare this workforce for integration into inter-professional teams at primary care medical homes, as patient care coordinators/navigators and wellness and chronic disease self- management coaches, amongst a host of possible roles. AHEC has partnered with three community colleges to provide basic and specialty CHW training programs that are tailored to the needs of diverse consumers and prospective employers.<sup>i</sup>
- **The CT AHEC Network Community Health Worker “Boot Camp”** focuses on core competency training<sup>ii</sup> including the basic knowledge and skills critical to working with vulnerable individuals and families that are at risk for poor health outcomes. The “Boot Camp” targets recruitment of individuals from urban and rural underserved communities, who reflect the diversity of Connecticut’s underserved and are less likely to enter the workforce through more academic pathways. The training is 54 hours, highly interactive and includes job shadowing and mentoring with experienced CHWs. This “Boot Camp” training is a working collaboration with the Central Massachusetts AHEC CHW training program. This basic training is the stepping stone to enter a CHW educational path in CT’s Community Colleges, which can lead to credit toward an Associate’s Degree, creating an educational and career ladder.

The CT AHEC Network is dedicated and committed to reducing and eliminating health disparities by collaborating and creating partnerships with organizations that aim to improve healthcare access on a national, statewide, regional or local level. Our AHECs serve as leaders, facilitators, or participants in numerous collaborations.

On a national level the AHEC networks have collaborations with National Health Service Corps, National Association of Medical Minority Educators, National Rural Health Association and many others. Over the years, the Connecticut AHEC network has collaborated with over 290 federal, state and community partners. This includes but is not limited to:

- American Lung Association
- Community Health Center Association of CT
- CT Center for Primary Care
- CT Coalition for Oral Health
- CT Dental Hygienists Association
- CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
- CT Department of Public Health
- CT Department of Social Services
- CT Hospital Association
- CT Office of the Healthcare Advocate
- CT Oral Health Coalition (COHI)
- CT State Dental Association
- Local Departments of Health
- Primary Care Action Group
- Veterans Health Administration

Federally, AHECs have collaborated with:

- Human Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)
- Centers for Disease Control
- Office of Minority Health, Region 1

Institutional Partners that AHECs have collaborated with include but not limited to:

- Capital Community College
- Fairfield University
- Gateway Community College
- Housatonic Community College
- Quinnipiac University Physician Assistant Program
- Southern Connecticut State University
- University of Bridgeport
- University of Connecticut
- University of Hartford
- University of St. Joseph's College
- Western Connecticut State University
- Wesleyan College

### **Southwestern AHEC**

Southwestern AHEC's region covers southern Fairfield and New Haven counties, from Greenwich to Madison. Our office staffing consists of 6 FTEs, and we are fortunate to have 3 AmeriCorps volunteers who assist us in implementing our K-16 Health Careers programming.

Southwestern AHEC also receives funding from the CT Department of Public Health for the **Immunization Action Plan (IAP) Program** in Bridgeport. This program works to increase immunization levels among children aged 0-2 years in the Bridgeport community. Through building collaborations and partnerships with local pediatricians, hospitals, schools and community based agencies Southwestern AHEC's Community Health Worker (CHW) has assisted to improve the number of Bridgeport children who are up to date for vaccines at age 2 from 63% in 2004 to more than 70% each year. The number of children linked to a medical home in 2005 was 53%. **Due to the CHW's outreach efforts, this figure is now >90% each year. Outreach and education** is focused at community health fairs, schools, social service agencies and faith-based organizations. More than 2,000 parents, teachers, health care and other service providers, and other community members are given information each year on the importance of immunizing against vaccine-preventable diseases.

### **Oral Health**

Southwestern AHEC chairs the **ORBIT Collaborative**, a coalition created in September 1999 with the mission to increase access to quality and affordable dental care services for underserved and vulnerable populations in Bridgeport and Stratford. Southwestern AHEC has served as fiduciary for more than \$1 million in grant funding received by ORBIT from the Connecticut Health Foundation from 2002-2010, as well as smaller grants from the CT State Dental Society, People's Bank Foundation, the Near & Far Foundation and the City of Bridgeport Community Development Block Grant. Under Southwestern AHEC's direction, **ORBIT:**

- **Increased the number of Preventive and Treatment visits** to Bridgeport and Stratford children ages 0-18 by **356%** from 2002-2007
- **Coordinated free preventive and restorative dental care for more than 1,000 local children, valued at more than \$500,000**
- Continues to collectively provide oral health education and improved access to care in the Greater Bridgeport area, focusing on young children and their parents.

Southwestern AHEC also participates in oral health initiatives outside the Bridgeport region through the statewide CT Coalition on Oral Health.

### **Withdrawal of AHEC funding will seriously jeopardize our ability to attract other resources in support of programs that address health care workforce development.**

Fiscal support for the CT AHEC Network is as diverse as its programs with state, federal, foundation and private support. Withdrawal of state support will jeopardize these other resources. In the era of health care transformation, maintaining the \$400,643 CT AHEC Network line item in the 2016-2017 state budget is critical to assure that the CT AHEC Network will be there to deliver its unique services and programs to our residents as we create the diverse, well trained and cost effective inter-professional healthcare workforce that Connecticut requires and deserves.

---

<sup>i</sup> CT SIM Model Test Proposal – Project Narrative.

[http://www.healthreform.ct.gov/ohri/lib/ohri/sim/cmml\\_additional\\_test\\_grant\\_questions/revised\\_project\\_narrative\\_ct\\_09082014\\_posted.pdf](http://www.healthreform.ct.gov/ohri/lib/ohri/sim/cmml_additional_test_grant_questions/revised_project_narrative_ct_09082014_posted.pdf), pp. 13-14.

<sup>ii</sup> Rosenthal EL, Wiggins N, Brownstein JN, Johnson S, Borbón IA, Rael R, et al., editors. A summary of the National Community Health Advisor Study: weaving the future. Tucson (AZ): University of Arizona; 1998 Jun [cited 2010 Mar 14]. Available from: <http://www.rho.arizona.edu/Resources/Studies/cha-study>